

Hearing on Highway-Rail Grade Crossing Safety
U. S. Senate Subcommittee on Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine
10:00 AM, Thursday, March 25, 1999

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Senator Hutchison, thank you for inviting me to testify on Highway-Rail Grade Crossing Safety. I represent Operation Lifesaver, a twenty-seven year old, non-profit public awareness program dedicated to ending tragic collisions, deaths and injuries at America's railroad crossings and rights-of way.

Operation Lifesaver is at the heart of railroad safety. In 1998, 95.6% of all rail-related deaths involved vehicle/train collisions and trespasser/pedestrian incidents on railroad rights-of-way.

Since 1972, Operation Lifesaver has grown from a one-time only, six-week campaign in Idaho to a national organization involving 49 state programs, 200 trainers and 3,000 trained and certified public speakers. Since 1989, Operation Lifesaver, Inc., national support center for the organization, has worked to ensure that public awareness and education efforts nationally in the area of railroad crossing safety are consistent, credible and continual.

The program has been effective. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) credits Operation Lifesaver with helping to prevent 10,000 deaths and 40,000 injuries since 1972. During the past decade alone, we have helped reduce fatalities at crossings by 42%, despite 20% increases in highway and freight rail traffic. Between 1997 and 1998, fatalities dropped by another 8%, according to preliminary statistics collected by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

Where we used to say a collision between a vehicle and a train occurred every 90 minutes, we can now say a collision between a train and a vehicle or person occurs every 100 minutes. This year, we believe the fatality rate will drop to every 110 minutes. We are making progress. However, the Bourbonnais tragedy proves once more that even one crash is too many.

To our frustration, some of our statistics never change. For twenty-seven years, Operation Lifesaver has faced the same leading contributors to tragedy on the rails: driver impatience and driver inattention. Consider the following facts:

- Nearly 50% of the crashes at highway-rail grade crossings occur where there are active warning devices in place: flashing lights, gates, bells.
- In 50% of the crashes that occurred in 1997 where a crossing was equipped with gates, the driver either proceeded through the gates without pausing at all, or stopped and then drove around the gates, evidently in the belief that he or she could "beat the train".
- The majority of highway crashes occur within 25 miles from home. The driver of the semi-trailer truck at Bourbonnais lived only seven miles from the crossing.
- It takes a mile or more for the average freight train moving at 55 miles per hour, or a passenger train moving at 79 miles per hour, to come to a stop after the emergency brakes are applied. By

the time the locomotive engineer sees a vehicle on the tracks ahead, it is probably too late to prevent a collision. The testimony you will hear today from Billy Parker, an Amtrak engineer and Operation Lifesaver Presenter and Trainer, will describe the terror of that reality.

What is being done? With our new contract with the FHWA, through the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, "T-21," for \$500,000 annually for six years, and continued appropriations ranging from \$150,000 to \$600,000 through the FRA, Operation Lifesaver, Inc., is heading into the 21st Century working smarter and better than ever. Our objectives are simple:

- 1) To empower effective state programs;
- 2) To encourage the exchange of innovative solutions and "best practices";
- 3) To develop effective public awareness and education programs.

Empowering State Programs

Next week, 45 of Operation Lifesaver's State Coordinators will meet in St. Louis for professional management training, supported by funds from FHWA and FRA. Operation Lifesaver wants its state coordinators better equipped to get the biggest impact out of their limited resources.

In 1999, for the second year, a total of \$300,000 will be available in OLI/FRA state grants for community projects that target key audiences. For example, the Texas Operation Lifesaver program received \$28,000 in 1998 for the Houston Trespass Prevention Program, an aggressive Operation Lifesaver safety campaign in the public schools. This investment attracted \$10,000 in matching funds last year. South Carolina received \$10,000 for its 1998 *Highways or Dieways* public service announcement (PSA) campaign and related activities. This project attracted \$40,000 in matching funds and broadcast time. In 1998, we approved a total of \$295,000 in grants for 55 projects in 26 states, leveraging an additional \$280,000 in matching funds and in-kind services.

What more could be done? First of all, funding for Operation Lifesaver's successful states assistance grant program now depends on the good will of Congressional appropriators. Over the past five years, it has ranged from \$50,000 to \$300,000 annually, representing half of the funding we were appropriated for special projects and creation of new educational materials. Authorization of a consistent funding level of at least \$300,000 for three to four years would allow states to plan more sophisticated multi-year projects in key corridors and communities.

Also, it is worth noting that 73% of all train/vehicle crashes occur in fifteen states: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and Wisconsin. Each of these states should have the strongest possible Operation Lifesaver programs, including full-time state coordinators whose sole work is to promote highway-rail grade crossing safety and trespass prevention. Half of these states now depend on part-time coordinators, whose "real" work takes priority over Operation Lifesaver efforts. An initial authorization of \$200,000 annually would provide "seed" money to encourage support for full-time coordinators in these top priority states.

Encouraging the Exchange of Innovative Solutions and "Best Practices"

In 1998, Operation Lifesaver stepped up its efforts to become a clearinghouse for “best practices” and new technologies. During our 10th International Symposium, we sponsored workshops, open to the public, on emerging, cutting-edge technology solutions and “best practices” for community law enforcement for railroad safety. We will provide similar forums for law enforcement, state and county officials, and highway engineers during our 1999 Regional Workshops.

What more could be done? Last week’s events at Bourbonnais, and the public discussions arising from it, have convinced me that facilitating the exchange of neutral, “user-friendly” information on promising technologies is one of the most important things Operation Lifesaver must offer as we approach the 21st Century. Authorization of an additional \$200,000 annually would allow us to better coordinate and disseminate information, and would also allow us to expand our outreach beyond immediate Operation Lifesaver partners and participants.

Developing Effective Public Awareness and Education Initiatives

Last year, Operation Lifesaver’s trained and certified Presenters gave 30,000 safety presentations to nearly 2,000,000 individuals. Half of those were school aged youngsters. About 1,100 of the presentations were given to nearly 40,000 professional truck drivers. Our volunteers are a valuable resource, and this year we are working to better prepare and retain them. Toward this end, we recently conducted special training for our eighteen Level 3 “Master” Trainers, who will offer advanced-level workshops for our Presenter Trainers this summer.

Our 3,000 Presenters cannot possibly reach all 200,000,000 Americans on a regular basis, however. Therefore, we have created and widely distributed several video training modules for use by groups with or without assistance from Operation Lifesaver.

Specifically, with funds from the U.S. DOT and help from national law enforcement and firefighting groups, we created “They Shouldn’t Die This Way” for emergency responders. We cooperated closely with FHWA and the pupil transportation industry after the Fox River Grove school bus/train tragedy to produce “The Responsibility is Ours” for school bus drivers, which is now being distributed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. “Physics 101” was developed with help from the American Trucking Associations. A special FHWA contract in 1998 allowed us to produce “Die Hard if You’re Dumb”, an MTV-style video and training module created with the assistance of teens for teens, and it’s receiving great reviews.

In a related educational endeavor, Operation Lifesaver has a contract with the International Association of Chiefs of Police to develop a model Grade Crossing Collision Investigation Course curriculum for use by law enforcement across the country and in state police academies.

Finally, since 1996 Operation Lifesaver and the Association of American Railroads have invested almost \$2,500,000 to create and broadcast the most powerful PSA campaign ever devised in the interest of rail safety, *Highways or Dieways: the Choice is Yours*. The nine PSAs in the *Highways or Dieways* series have made 450,000,000 “viewer impressions” and reached an estimated 100,000,000 American viewers since 1996 when they first were launched in Texas. The *Highways or Dieways* PSAs have generated an equivalent of \$5,000,000 in donated broadcast time during the past four years. I know they make an impression. I receive calls about the spots every week.

What more could be done? This year, in addition to the \$300,000 we hope again to receive from

appropriators for general Operation Lifesaver education programs, we will seek \$250,000 to create and distribute new videos and training materials for professional truckers and the transit industry.

In addition, we need to prepare a new, unified PSA campaign, involving all of our partners in railroad crossing safety and trespass prevention. This is a unique challenge. When the *Highways or Dieways* concept was first recommended to Operation Lifesaver by the Association of American Railroads, the FRA was already committed to their own railroad crossing safety and trespass prevention campaign, *Always Expect a Train*. As a result, Operation Lifesaver and its partners were unable to aggressively pursuing a single, comprehensive media strategy. Ultimately, the *Always Expect a Train* and *Highways or Dieways* campaigns did make an impact. However, neither achieved the momentum they could have with a truly unified campaign. OLI and its partners agree that we cannot afford to take a scattergun approach this time. A multi-year authorization of \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 per year for Operation Lifesaver would establish a base from which we could take the lead in building the funding alliance necessary to leverage maximum impact for the next PSA campaign.

Summary

During the past week, I have been asked what Operation Lifesaver and its partners need to do in order to end tragedy on the rails. The answer, I believe, is to do what we have been doing in Education, Engineering and Enforcement but to do more of it, better.

The annual funding authority recommended in this testimony is modest in comparison with other national safety campaigns. The amounts suggested possibly could be covered by legislation being introduced by Senator Lott this week, to create an Operation Lifesaver "Look, Listen and Live" postage stamp to raise funds for highway-rail grade crossing safety and trespass prevention.

As the tragic Bourbonnais collision illustrated, even one train/vehicle collision is too many. Operation Lifesaver and its partners have made good progress during the past 27 years, but our work will not be complete until the number of collisions, deaths and injuries at highway-rail grade crossings and along railroad rights-of way is zero. The authorization of consistent, multi-year funding for Operation Lifesaver and its state programs would help us achieve that goal. It may be the most important thing we can do for railroad safety.

Thank you.